

FISH AND WILDLIFE CONTESTS

Since human beings started killing wild animals for food, clothing and tools, some sort of competition between various tribes or individuals has been evolutionarily implicit.

"Ugg" for example, was always known as the best tracker, "Loper" the best spear thrower, and "Rock" the best finisher of woolly mammoth. Their tribe prospered over neighboring tribes because of the superior skills they brought to the serious business of survival. Killing wildlife was not a matter of a contest for them, rather a necessity to survive. The individual or tribe who killed the most, with the least effort, out-competed the other tribes in the survival game. The winner lived, the loser likely didn't. Who was the best was not measured in money, a new spear, or some sort of prize. The best survived; that was the point.

Hunters and anglers now enjoy, or even prefer wild game or fish at their table, but for most, hunting and fishing success is not the difference between having food and going hungry.

And yet, competition is part of human nature. Take a look into just about any activity – from cooking to chess to youth hockey – and you can find a competition, so it's not surprising that contests related to hunting and fishing have developed.

These contests exist at all levels, from friendly two-bit wagers between hunting or fishing partners, to big-business, national, professional bass and walleye fishing circuits with six-figure payouts and participants who become niche celebrities. Local wildlife clubs hold ice fishing derbies to raise money for local projects, while national groups hold pro-ams in conjunction with tournaments to raise money for charities.

In the hunting world we have contests for goose hunting, duck hunting, big bucks, longest pheasant tail, prairie dogs, coyotes and others, and that's just in North Dakota.

To some people this proliferation and escalation of hunting and fishing contests is a natural progression that brings attention to outdoor pursuits, and attracts business to local areas from competitors and sponsors. To others, these contests are highly unsettling because they see hunting and fishing as individual activities for which success is not supposed to be measured in just the number or size of game or fish taken, but rather in fair chase, aesthetics and the quality of the outing.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department does not typically endorse or condemn wildlife contests. This "no position" philosophy is occasionally criticized. Some people want the agency to be much more involved in promoting local and statewide contests and the perceived economic benefits associated with them. Others want the agency to ban all fishing and hunting related contests, period, because they tarnish the image of hunters and anglers at large and interfere with their enjoyment of the resource.

When it comes to hunting contests, Game and Fish actually has little regulatory authority. As long as participants are legally licensed and adhere to bag limit and other regulations, there is no permit process contest organizers have to follow, unless the event focuses on a state wildlife management area.

Fishing contests are a little different, since most fishing takes place on public waters where the fishery is managed by the Department. Most fishing contests need permits from Game and Fish, and the agency sets the conditions under which contests can be held. Contest sponsors are responsible for staying within these guidelines, or they risk nonrenewal of their permit the following year.

In the November 1993 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, Game and Fish administrators attached their name to an "Our Point of View" column that addressed wildlife contests. "Hunting and fishing should be promoted for individual, family and group enjoyment," the column stated. "This Department does not support hunting contests that could portray an adverse societal image of hunters. While these contests are not prohibited by state law, our Department cannot endorse them."

While the director, deputy director and three of the division chiefs have since changed, the Department's philosophy today is generally the same. From a resource standpoint, wildlife contests are not typically detrimental to local fish or wildlife populations. They can, however, generate negative sentiment.

Our intent here is to present some opinions From Both Sides, and let you decide how you feel about contests that involve wildlife.

One Side

- Contests are fun. Putting some money on who can catch the most fish, shoot the most prairie dogs, or get the biggest buck is friendly competition and hurts nothing.

- Contests are legal and contestants cannot violate any game and fish laws or they will be disqualified and be subject to the same penalties as any game law violator.

- Contests are a source of fundraising for local charities or wildlife groups which use the money to benefit their cause or help the local fish and wildlife resource.

- Contests may have locally significant economic return that is positive to communities sponsoring them. It is a type of economic benefit that is welcome in many areas.

- Many professional contestants use techniques and equipment that are on the cutting edge of hunting and fishing. As these techniques are developed and refined, they are shared with the general public to increase skill and enjoyment of both hunting and fishing.



The Other Side

- Contests can congest a particular area, diminishing nonparticipating public use and enjoyment of public resources.

- In pursuits such as fishing and hunting that are largely based on personal satisfaction, competition is a contradiction that tends to diminish the primary purposes such as fair chase, gathering food from the wild, aesthetics, and relaxation.

- In an era where hunting and fishing are no longer a large part of the fabric of America, contests can portray hunting and fishing in a negative public way, reducing public support.

- When money is on the line, situations develop where otherwise legitimate hunters or anglers stray from legal and ethical rules of fair chase in order to win.

- Contests send the message that whomever spends the most money is the best hunter or angler, and suggest that anglers need a \$50,000 25-foot boat, or 500 bigfoot decoys, in order to enjoy a hunting or fishing outing.

- Economic association with contests can put hunting and fishing in the category of commerce, rather than as a personal pursuit that helps bind humans and nature.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.